



## Memorandum

Date: July 16, 2019

Subject: INFORMATION: Audit Announcement | Review of FAA's Oversight of Open-Door Helicopter Operations | Project No. 19A3003A000  
Federal Aviation Administration

From: Matthew E. Hampton  
Assistant Inspector General for Aviation Audits 

To: Federal Aviation Administration

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Following the March 11, 2018, fatal Liberty Helicopters crash in New York, New York, Senators Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand requested that the Department of Transportation Inspector General—in consultation with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)—review Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) involvement with helicopter air tours. The Senators asked us to determine if tourists are permitted to fly with the helicopter doors off on commercial flights, and how the safety restraint system used during the tragic Liberty Helicopters crash received its original approval from FAA. Specifically, we were asked to address how FAA reviewed, tested, and approved the supplemental restraint system, and to determine FAA's role in ensuring that helicopters in use today meet modern safety standards. In our August 2018 response to the Senators, we noted that we had contacted NTSB about its investigation, reviewed the status of prior recommendations we have made on helicopter safety, and developed plans for reviewing additional helicopter-related issues in a future audit of FAA's oversight of the air tour industry.

Following an urgent NTSB safety recommendation, FAA issued an emergency order on March 22, 2018 prohibiting the use of supplemental passenger restraint systems during doors-off flight operations, which cannot be released quickly in an emergency. FAA also now requires helicopter operators to obtain a Letter of Authorization which the Agency issues after it confirms any supplemental restraints used do not hinder emergency evacuations and that a passenger can quickly release themselves.

To address Senator Schumer's and Gillibrand's request, the objectives of this audit are to assess FAA's processes for (1) review and approval of supplemental

restraints for open-door helicopter operations and (2) oversight of company use of supplemental restraints.

We plan to begin the audit later this month and will contact your audit liaison to schedule an entrance conference. We will conduct audit work at FAA Headquarters in Washington, DC and select FAA offices which oversee helicopter operations. We will also interview a small representative sample of companies that use supplemental restraints. Our audit will be coordinated with NTSB, industry associations, and other helicopter tour industry stakeholders. If you have any questions or need additional information please contact me at (202) 366-0500 or Tina Nysted, Program Director, at (404) 562-3770.

cc: FAA Audit Liaison, AAE-100  
DOT Audit Liaison, M-1